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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 001412

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/27/2017
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [ECPS](#) [SOCI](#) [SCUL](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: GROWING PAINS: IMPROVEMENTS IN SAUDI MEDIA
LIBERALIZATION

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Michael Gfoeller for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In the past five years, there have been significant and positive changes in the Saudi media thanks to King Abudullah, gains by moderates in the SAG, and subsequent ministry restructuring. There are more moderate commentary in the press, more reporting done on previously taboo subjects, more inroads for women, and modifications to the previously ultra-conservative media. The SAG has also used the press as a marketing tool for its reform initiatives and has improved its communication with the Saudi press. The SAG, however, still retains direct and indirect controls over the media. The trend for liberalization will likely continue as new technology and regional media will further limit the SAG's control of news and information. END SUMMARY.

A NEW SEASON PREMIERES IN SAUDI ARABIA

¶2. (C) In the past few years, there have been significant and positive changes in the Saudi media, which were partly a result of two tragedies: the 9/11 attacks, which riveted international attention on Saudi Arabia, the home of Osama bin Laden and a breeding ground for terrorism; and the Mecca fire in 2002 when 15 school girls died after members of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) known as mutaween (religious police) prevented the unveiled girls from escaping their burning school. The subsequent harsh criticism of this needless tragedy both weakened the institution of and public support for the CPVPV, a source of power and influence for Saudi religious conservatives, and gave moderates an opportunity to make major structural changes in the government.

¶3. (C) Realizing it had to counter domestic extremism and improve its global image, accordingly, the SAG made changes, starting in 2003, by turning the Ministry of Information into the Ministry of Culture and Information (MOCI), placing all cultural programs previously scattered throughout the government, often in the vice-like grip of religious conservatives, under one umbrella. The groundwork was laid for Dr. Iyad bin Amen Madani, who was named MOCI Minister in February 2005, to make dramatic changes in Saudi cultural policy, which in turn impacted positively the Saudi media. For example, moderate voices are now heard in Saudi literary clubs (one of the few government-sanctioned outlets to

promote intellectual debate); book fairs are open to mixed gender audiences and display previously-banned books; cultural activities are co-sponsored with foreign embassies; and Saudi culture has been promoted abroad with cultural tours in Russia, China and the EU.

HOME IMPROVEMENT: SAUDI MEDIA EXPANDS ITS REPORTING

¶4. (C) Saudi media have quickly followed suit, routinely publishing articles on previously unreported topics and commentaries critical of certain government entities, notably the once untouchable CPVPV. Journalist can do more investigative journalism on issues that were once banned from open public discussion, such as domestic abuse, women's rights, prostitution, homosexuality, drug and alcohol abuse, poverty, and crime. A recent example is the reporting on the deaths of three Saudi citizens, allegedly at the hands of the mutaween, that has resulted in substantial and harsh criticism of the CPVPV.

¶5. (C) SAG-controlled media have also become more moderate. In 2004, the 24-hour, SAG-controlled news channel Al-Ikhbariyya was launched to improve the image of Saudi Arabia, complete with women broadcasters (in hijab but wearing makeup). The SAG-controlled Holy Qur'an radio, broadcast throughout the region and Africa, changed its format from continuous, ultra-conservative sermons to more moderate sermons, news bulletins, and informative and educational programming. "Oprah-style" call-in shows are proliferating on TV and radio throughout the region featuring religious sheikhs who cite the Holy Qu'ran in order to provide family counseling on once-taboo topics. For example,

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they have reprimanded a husband for taking a second wife and ignoring his first wife while she was in the hospital for a kidney transplant, chastised men for practicing the "pre-Islamic tradition" of not eating with their family, and asserted that women can sit in the front seat of a car with their husbands.

¶6. (C) However, not all media have embraced change. Saudi Channel I remains ultra-conservative, made up of primarily religious programming. Also, MOCI Minister Madani has not had much luck with the Saudi Press Agency (SPA), which simply continues to parrot government statements, much to his chagrin.

LAW AND ORDER IN THE SAUDI MEDIA

¶7. (C) Nonetheless, the SAG frequently uses the Saudi media as a tool to promote its reform programs, influence discussion, and test the waters among its very conservative population. For example, the Shura Council will debate a new proposal that is reported in the press, generating commentary and debate. Should the debate become confrontational or ignite severe pushback from religious conservatives, the Minister of Interior will make a negative public comment, which is dutifully widely reported in the press, thus effectively shelving the proposal. Consequently, press coverage and discussion on the issue disappears. This pattern has been frequently repeated, such as with a proposal for Saudi women to drive, changing the Saudi weekend to Friday/Saturday, or allowing classes to be taught in English.

¶8. (C) However, Saudi journalists stress that they no longer must wait for the MOCI to "bless" a story before running it. They also frequently emphasize that the SAG has taken proactive measures to improve cooperation with the media. For example, Saudi government officials are conducting more press conferences and interacting with the media. Many of the ministries, such as the Ministry of

Health and the CPVPV, now have media spokesmen. Coverage of debate within the SAG has also increased. The once-closed debate in the Shura Council was first opened to print media, then a weekly TV summary. The MOCI has announced that a C-SPAN-type channel will soon be devoted to the Council, providing Saudis full access to these discussions.

¶9. (C) Lastly, foreign journalists are now more accepted in the Kingdom, obtaining visas and credentials more rapidly. Reuters and Agence France Press now have offices in the Kingdom, as do Russian and Chinese media outlets. There are also plans for a BBC Arabic Channel in the Kingdom.

BIG BROTHER: SAG STILL HAS THE UPPER HAND

¶10. (C) For worse or better, the SAG still oversees the Saudi media, directly controlling TV and radio channels and the SPA. The government indirectly controls the "independent" print media through its press law, which mandates that a newspaper's Board of Directors must submit nominations for editor-in-chief to the MOCI for final approval. Also, each newspaper in the Kingdom is backed, if not owned, by a member of the Royal Family.

¶11. (C) Saudi Radio also recently introduced a weekly program called "open majlis" in which Saudi citizens can freely air their grievances and complaints without censorship. Reportedly, the program irritated several cabinet ministers who complained to MOCI Minister Madani about the frankness of the commentary and the sheer number of grievances. However, these ministers stopped complaining once they were told that King Abdullah sponsored this program. In a May 19, 2007, interview with Al-Hayat newspaper, the host of "open majlis" pointed out the usefulness of his program by contrasting its openness with the Saudi media which had failed to report on 20 percent of these complaints and grievances because they cross the SAG's red line.

¶12. (C) Government control aside, newspaper editors also practice self-censorship based on what they assume the MOCI will allow. Editors-in-chief often attend briefings at the MOCI to hear the SAG's view on current events and issues, and take their cues. Interior Minister Prince Naif has also made

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a public point of meeting with editors. Journalists know there are red lines that they dare not cross. The Grand Mufti is beyond reproach. The King and Royal Family are beyond criticism, as most recently and currently evidenced by reports in the international press on Prince Bandar's questionable financial dealings. Once Bandar issued a statement to the SPA, all reporting and commentary in the Kingdom stopped, even positive commentary defending the Prince. Journalists who fail to heed unwritten rules are still routinely called in for questioning, according to Okaz Deputy Editor-in-Chief Khaled al-Firm, or simply fired.

¶13. (C) Perhaps the most famous incident of the firing of a prominent editor for going over the red line, was the dismissal of Jamal Khashoggi, then editor-in-chief of Al-Watan, on May 27, 2003. Allegedly, the SAG had Khashoggi fired because Khashoggi had criticized thirteenth and fourteenth century Hanbali jurist and favorite of Wahhabis, Ibn Tamiyya. Khashoggi had blamed Ibn Tamiyya's fatwa, that said it was permissible to kill Muslims if they stood in the way of killing infidels, for encouraging extremism and terrorism. At that time, Khashoggi was reacting to the 2003 bombings of three Western compounds in Riyadh. By the time of his firing Khashoggi had made many powerful enemies through his comments, notably the CPVPV, religious leaders, and conservatives. However, in April 2007, Al-Watan, owned by then Asir Provincial Governor Prince Khaled Al-Faisal and operated by Prince Bandar bin Khaled Al-Faisal, re-hired

Khashoggi. Upon his return, Khashoggi said that he felt encouraged by the changes in Saudi media, but that he knows his limits. Khashoggi said that Saudi media is more open compared to 2003, that the environment is healthy now, and that most things that were once controversial are now being debated by every Saudi paper. (NOTE: No sooner had one branch of the Al-Faisal family fired Khashoggi than another branch, Prince Turki Al-Faisal, then Saudi Ambassador to the UK and later Saudi Ambassador to the U.S., hired Khashoggi as an advisor. END NOTE).

WOMEN JOURNALISTS: THEY MIGHT JUST MAKE IT AFTER ALL

¶14. (C) Women are making gradual gains in the media and increasingly allowed to work at newspaper bureaus (specifically in Riyadh), though in separate, secluded offices. Aforementioned Al-Ikhbariyya was the first Saudi TV network to feature women anchors, and Saudi Channel II Director Mohammed Barayan insisted that the women,s advisor be moved to an office on the same floor as the male executives.

¶15. (C) Training for women (and men) in journalism remains limited. There is only one journalism school in the Kingdom offering undergraduate courses to men only; women can, however, earn a master,s degree in journalism. Several Saudi female journalists, highly educated and fluent in English, complain they are forced to report only on cultural, family, and religious issues. Many of these women seek opportunities abroad in London or Dubai.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) When compared to independent press in the West, Saudi Arabia still has a long way to go. However, organizational changes in the ministries and opening up to more moderate views in the media indicate that liberalization is happening and likely to continue. Cable TV packages offering pan-Arab news channels, such as Al-Jazira and Al-Arabiya, are already available to anyone who can afford a satellite dish, and the internet and inevitable new technologies will only increase access and speed to news and discussion. Saudi bloggers, such as those on the site Sahat, are a popular means around the red-line restricted media. They are already adding a new element to political discussion, with outspoken voices boldly attacking the Royal Family, the religious establishment, and liberal voices. Saudi Arabia, like the rest of the world, is discovering the joys and sorrows of the Information Age. END COMMENT.
FRAKER